



# NOT SUCH A WONDERFUL LIFE

PUPPY MILLS  
WILL CEASE TO  
EXIST IF PEOPLE  
STOP BUYING  
WHAT THEY'RE  
SELLING

*By Elizabeth Oreck*



**Parker** was about eight years old when he was rescued from a West Virginia puppy mill. Although his early years weren't what any dog deserves, Parker was adopted and now has a wonderful home of his own.

**E**very year at this time, families across the country look forward to the tradition of enjoying that timeless holiday classic, Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. And while we revel in this heartwarming tale of human compassion and salvation, we are likely not thinking about the plight of the hundreds of thousands of dogs in puppy mills. But at no other time of year should these dogs be more top of mind. After all, 'tis the season of the often-requested Christmas gift of a puppy.

And yet, for that puppy under the tree to materialize, we must consider the countless dogs at any given moment living in cramped and often filthy cages, breeding continuously in order to produce as many puppies as possible for the retail pet trade. While Americans dig deep into their pockets to purchase new toys, treats, sweaters or cozy pet beds as holiday gifts for their



beloved furry companions, dogs living in mills receive no such gifts. Not even the opportunity to go for a walk or experience a kind human touch.

Puppy mills are in business to supply pet stores and online retailers, and, as is the case with most retail, the holidays are the most profitable time of year. Puppy sellers capitalize on parents' anticipation of the joy on their child's face when he or she receives that adorable puppy wrapped in a big red bow on Christmas morning. But that gift comes at a cost that far exceeds the dollar amount on the price tag, and it is a price paid every day by breeder dogs on the puppy production line.

### WHAT IS A PUPPY MILL, ANYWAY?

A puppy mill is a high-volume commercial dog-breeding operation in which profit and maximum production take priority over the health and welfare of the animals. Puppies bred in these factory-like settings are regarded as nothing more than a cash crop commodity, and despite the poor conditions in which the breeder dogs are forced to live, puppy mills are still legal in every state.

Although commercial dog breeders who sell puppies wholesale to pet stores and distributors are licensed and regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the minimum required standards of care do little to protect dogs and nothing to ensure responsible, quality breeding. The dogs can be confined for years at a time, reduced to lives of constant breeding in dirty, stacked, wire-bottomed cages that are required to be only six inches larger than the dog on all sides, and with few, if any, opportunities to play, be walked, or receive basic grooming or veterinary care. There is no requirement that the dogs ever be let out of those cages, even for a moment, to stand on solid ground or experience the sun on their backs. When they are no longer able to produce, they are usually discarded or destroyed.

These are the parents of the puppies who are sold online or shipped to pet stores, where unsuspecting buyers are not informed of the backgrounds of these animals, nor the conditions under which they were bred. There are frequent reports of these puppies having congenital or communicable diseases, which cause heartache and expense for those who purchased them with the mistaken belief that they were buying a healthy pet from the best source possible. So, this is not just an animal welfare issue; it's a consumer protection issue, too.

Tragically, when the cost of caring for a sick puppy becomes more than the buyer can manage, it is not uncommon for that puppy to be surrendered to an overcrowded, taxpayer-subsidized shelter. Not all communities have puppy mills, but nearly every community has some byproduct of puppy mills — either a pet store that imports puppies from out-of-state mills or a shelter that takes in more dogs than they can adopt out. In short, the puppy mill problem impacts all of us.

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It is believed that there are approximately 10,000 licensed and unlicensed puppy mills in the U.S., mostly concentrated in the Midwest, which combined produce an estimated two million puppies per year. It's profoundly ironic that the number of puppies born in mills is roughly equal to the number of dogs being killed in U.S. shelters each year. And it begs the question: Why do we continue to manufacture dogs in mills when so many dogs who already exist are being destroyed every day, simply because there aren't enough people adopting them? The answer, of course, is profit. And those who typically make the largest profit are the retailers, who buy puppies at a low cost and then resell them at a high markup.

Pet stores purchase puppies from mills and wholesale brokers because no responsible breeder would ever sell to a pet store. This basic tenet can be found in every reputable breeder's code of ethics, including those of the parent breed clubs of the American Kennel Club. And even if they were inclined to sell to pet stores, the high cost of breeding responsibly means that a pet store could never afford to buy puppies from a reputable breeder, because the profit margin would be significantly less than it is when they buy from mills or brokers. The retail reality is that the less it costs to manufacture a product, the greater the opportunity for markup — and profit.

### WHY PUPPY MILLS CONTINUE TO EXIST

With all that we know about the terrible conditions of these facilities and the unethical breeding that occurs to produce a substandard quality of dog purely for profit, why do we still have puppy mills in this country? Because people are buying what the mills are producing. It is the most fundamental of economic principles: supply and demand. As long as there is a market for a product, that product will continue to be produced, no matter how over-saturated the market becomes.

There is, however, reason to be optimistic. When Best Friends launched its puppy mill initiatives in 2008, there were more than 6,000 USDA-licensed commercial dog breeders. Today, that number is closer to 2,000. One of the reasons for the decline is that the traditional puppy mill industry is becoming more prohibitive and less profitable, due to increased state and local regulations, greater media exposure and public awareness, and a struggling national economy that makes it more difficult for consumers to pay top dollar for a new puppy.

This doesn't mean, however, that substandard breeding is necessarily in decline. Backyard breeding is still a prevailing problem, dogs are being imported into the U.S. legally and illegally, many breeders are simply continuing



**Meeha**  
puppy mill survivor



**Confetti**  
puppy mill survivor

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*Elizabeth Oreck comforts a puppy mill survivor.*



**Chester**  
puppy mill survivor



**Ponder**  
puppy mill survivor

The solution to the problem is simple: If we stop buying what the mills are producing, there will be no reason for them to continue producing, and eventually they will cease to exist.

to breed without a USDA license, and a lot of selling is now being conducted online.

### PUP E-COMMERCE

Internet puppy buying and selling is a relatively recent phenomenon. And despite the obvious risks that come with purchasing anything online — let alone a living, sentient being — there is no denying that we’ve evolved into a point-and-click culture. Unfortunately, that form of convenient consumerism is how more and more people are bringing pets into their homes.

Unscrupulous puppy sellers exploit the opportunity to hide behind attractive websites and slick catalogs that feature stock photos of adorable puppies frolicking in fields or napping in wicker baskets. Consumers who receive these puppies shipped directly to their door never see the true conditions of the breeding facilities. They also have no way of knowing whether the puppy they purchase will be healthy, or anything like what they thought they were buying, thus elevating the risk of consumer fraud. It’s a game of retail Russian roulette, in which the odds favor the seller.

### WHAT ABOUT REPUTABLE BREEDERS?

As an organization committed to reaching a day when every pet will have a loving home, it goes without saying that Best Friends encourages everyone who is looking to bring a pet into the family to choose adoption over purchase. Although we recognize that there are caring and reputable private breeders who breed responsibly and ethically, it’s difficult for us to endorse any kind of breeding while so many animals are dying in shelters.

There are adoptable dogs of every breed, age, size and personality available throughout the U.S. Breed-specific rescue groups and online adoption databases like Petfinder.com make it easy to find exactly what you’re looking for. Adopting may require a little more effort, but what it lacks in convenience it makes up for in the knowledge that you’ve saved a life. And for parents set on the idea of giving a puppy as a gift, why not consider the gift of a promise to adopt? Making the adoption of a new pet a family decision gives every family member a part in the process and ensures that it will be the best match for all.

### SOLVING THE PROBLEM

We’ve made a lot of progress in the fight against puppy mills, but we still have more work to do, as puppies continue to be mass-produced in a manner that most animal-loving, compassionate individuals find abhorrent. The solution to the problem is simple: If we stop buying what the mills are producing, there will be no reason for them to continue producing, and eventually they will cease to exist. We need to stop supporting pet retailers that sell commercially bred puppies, because any money spent in those stores contributes to perpetuating the cycle of puppy mill cruelty.

Fortunately, there is a more humane alternative. Pet stores that offer animals for adoption relieve the burden on shelters and rescue groups by getting homeless pets into retail settings, where they have a greater chance of being seen by the public. It’s an increasingly popular model and a win-win for both the community and the animals. Several

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**ZZ**  
puppy mill survivor



**Tootsie**  
puppy mill survivor

commercial property-management companies have recently embraced this concept by implementing policies to lease space only to pet stores that operate under the adoption model.

Cities throughout North America (e.g., Los Angeles, San Diego and Toronto) are also getting on board by passing ordinances to ban the sale of commercially bred dogs, cats and rabbits in pet stores, unless they come from shelters or rescue groups. By cutting off the supply of milled puppies being imported into the community, they are addressing the puppy

mill problem from the retail end, while increasing adoption opportunities for pets in local shelters. And, since many dogs in shelters are cast-offs from people who purchased them in pet stores or online, banning retail sales helps reduce the number of animals who enter shelters and, consequently, the number being killed (currently more than 9,000 per day) in our nation's shelters.

So, we're heading in the right direction. We are witnessing a cultural shift in the way that we think about companion animals and how we choose to bring them into our homes. Adoption is becoming much more common, legislators are recognizing the need to pass better regulations for dog breeders and retailers, and there is more awareness than ever about the harsh realities of puppy mills. As people share their knowledge and take action in their own communities, we are steadily moving the needle in a more compassionate direction.

What it comes down to is this: The puppy mill problem belongs to all of us, and so does the solution. The ability to put this cruel industry in the past is in our collective hands. We have the power to set positive examples through our consumer decisions. We have the power to teach our kids — and each other — compassion for animals. We have the power to create changes for the better. We have the power to save lives. Working together, we can reach a time when puppies will no longer be mass-produced, adoption will be the first choice for those looking to bring a pet into the family, and there will be no more homeless pets. We're on the right track. We can save them all. After all, every dog deserves a wonderful life. 🐾

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**Miles**  
puppy mill survivor

## TOP 5 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP STOP PUPPY MILLS:

- 1 ALWAYS ADOPT YOUR PETS.
- 2 DON'T EVER BUY A PUPPY ONLINE OR FROM A MILL-SUPPLIED PET STORE.
- 3 SUPPORT LEGISLATION THAT REGULATES AND REDUCES BREEDING OF ANIMALS.
- 4 ELECT ANIMAL-FRIENDLY LEGISLATORS.
- 5 SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT THE CRUELTY OF PUPPY MILLS AND THE JOYS OF PET ADOPTION.

FOR 10 MORE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP STOP PUPPY MILLS, VISIT [puppymills.bestfriends.org](http://puppymills.bestfriends.org) AND CLICK ON "PUPPY MILL RESOURCE LIBRARY"